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Promise Scholarship succeeds in helping students pay for college

Gov. Gary Locke touts program he created

OLYMPIA - A new study of the Washington Promise Scholarship shows it does just what the governor and Legislature designed it to do: help the best and brightest students from low- and middle-income families in Washington pay for college.

"This study has found what we've known all along - that Promise Scholarships work," Gov. Gary Locke said. "I created this program to help low- and middle-income students live the American dream. It's our promise to them. No academically successful high school student should lose a college opportunity because he or she cannot afford it."

In 2002, the Legislature directed the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the scholarship program, now in its fourth year.

Lawmakers directed the evaluation to: analyze other types of financial aid students receive, analyze whether the Promise Scholarship has affected student indebtedness, and evaluate who successfully completes high school but is unable to attend college because of inadequate financial aid.

The HECB also studied the Promise Scholarship's influence on students' academic achievement and higher education attendance, and whether changes to the program would improve it.

The study found:

- The Promise Scholarship program is effectively responding to the statutory goal of providing scholarships to meritorious low- and middle-income high school graduates. The Promise Scholarship program made college more affordable for recipients.

Promise Scholarship recipients who received other financial aid, on average, received more grants - and they borrowed less - than other students with similar circumstances.

- For the program to influence - and not just reward - student behavior, it must be predictable and stable. Students must be reasonably sure that, if they meet eligibility standards, the scholarship will be available when they graduate from high school.
- Funding for the Promise Scholarship program should support awards that are equal to full-time community college tuition, as intended when the program was created. The maximum scholarship is the amount of tuition charged at the state's community colleges, but the HECB is directed to reduce the amount of the grant to make sure all eligible students receive at least some assistance. Because of budget restrictions and a spending cut in 2002, the purchasing power of the scholarship has declined in each of the last two years, from 94 percent of community college tuition in 2000-01 to 48 percent this year. This year's scholarship is \$948, while tuition for students enrolled full-time at the state's two-year colleges averages \$1,982.
- The program should maintain the current method of determining whether students are eligible for the scholarship. This year, students received the scholarship if they ranked in the top 15 percent of their graduating classes or scored at least 1,200 on the SAT or 27 on the ACT college entrance exams, **and** their family income did not exceed 135 percent of the state's median family income (currently about \$85,900 for a family of four). The board found that the use of academic **and** financial standards helps to ensure that state funding will be targeted for high-achieving students from low- and middle-income families.
- The program should be evaluated again later, when three or four groups of scholarship recipients have had the opportunity to graduate with baccalaureate degrees. This study focused on students in the first two years of the Promise program, who generally have not been in college long enough to receive a four-year degree.

The board considered whether the current academic requirement that students rank in the top 15 percent of their graduating class should be replaced or augmented by the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). The board found that the current approach ensures that all students across the state have the opportunity to qualify. The board determined that the eligibility issue should be studied further as information becomes available about students' success on the WASL. But for now, they recommend that the WASL should not replace the current "Top 15 percent" academic criterion.

"This study illustrates the merits of a scholarship program such as the Promise," said Marc Gaspard, executive director of the HECB. "The program was designed to help high-achieving students from working-class families get a college education, and it's working. But as the study found, we need to make sure these students can rely on the Promise

Scholarship in years to come, instead of watching the scholarship dwindle in value as it has recently.”

This year about 6,500 college freshmen and sophomores were eligible to receive the scholarship. Students may use the scholarship at public two- and four-year colleges and universities and accredited independent colleges, universities and career schools in Washington.

Gov. Locke first introduced the Promise Scholarship in 1999, and the Legislature implemented it as a provision of the operating budget. This year, lawmakers established the program in state law but cut the budget by about \$2.4 million for the 2002-03 academic year. As a result, the program received \$6.3 million instead of the originally budgeted amount of \$8.7 million.

The evaluation is available on the HECB Web site at:

[<http://www.hecb.wa.gov/docs/reports/WaPromiseEval12-2002.pdf>](http://www.hecb.wa.gov/docs/reports/WaPromiseEval12-2002.pdf)

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